



Buffalo Tales



Volume 14, No. 5

Buffalo County Historical Society

May-June, 1991

THE FOUNDING MOTHERS OF KEARNEY

by Margaret Stines Nielsen

The women who came to Kearney in the early days were primarily wives, mothers and daughters. But, as they stood by (or behind) their men, many made their own unique contributions to the development of the town.

Louisa Collins, the first woman in Kearney Junction, was aptly known as "the Mother of Kearney" in her later years. In a letter to historian S. C. Bassett she described Kearney's beginnings. In 1871 town locator D. N. Smith and the Reverend Asbury Collins came by rail to Grand Island where Smith had a team. An April storm struck near "the old Fort" and they were cared for "under the hospitable roof of Mr. and Mrs. Sydenham." The next day, accompanied by Sydenham, they crossed "the river running with ice . . . Mr. Smith said he had not intended to locate Kearney Junct. but he thought it just as well . . . and my (husband) took his claim."

Collins returned to Iowa and in May brought out his wife, two sons and a niece. The only house, occupied by four homesteaders, was a 16 x 16 shack made of wood sheathing. They built on a leanto for the Collins family, and Louisa furnished board for George and James Smith. On the fourth of July they moved into a seven-room house where Mrs. Collins continued to take in the people who were crowding into town.

Herbert K. Greenman, grandson of Presbyterian minister Nahum Gould, wrote, "My first remembrance of Kearney was eating a meal at the old Collins house with my parents, and I can still see Mrs. Collins' kindly face. She was a good friend of all boys and girls; I was then four years old and the year was 1872."¹

The first church service was held in the Collins home after Asbury had written to Elder White, of the huge Omaha district, that "there are some sheep out here who need looking after." It was October before Elder White arrived and organized a class



Mrs. Louisa Collins, the Mother of Kearney

WITH THE SOCIETY

The Annual Meeting was held on April 21 in the Fellowship Hall at the First United Methodist Church in Kearney. Following a 1:00 p.m. dinner, "The Classics," a Kearney High School Girls Ensemble sang several selections under the direction of Francis Wilson.

Previous organizations of Buffalo County Historical Societies were recounted by Philip S. Holmgren, followed by recollections of the development of the 20-year life of the present Society, which was organized in January, 1972.

The business meeting was conducted by Jim Cudaback, president. Reports of the year's work and activities were given. Membership figures stand at 131 Life Members, 63 Supporting, 11 Institutional, and 245 Basic.

Adopted: a motion to decrease *Buffalo Tales* publications to eight issues in 1991, and six issues in subsequent years, due to increased postal rates; also a clarification of "board members outside Kearney" to include rural Kearney.

New directors elected for 3-year terms were Howard Kolbo, Mardi Anderson and Lois Rahmann of Kearney. Reelected for a 3-year term was Jim Cudaback of Riverdale. Retiring directors were Merlin Burgland of Kearney, Barb Avery of Elm Creek and Frances Link of Ravenna.

New Officers of the Society were elected at the meeting of the Board of Directors on May 18. Susan C. Lynch of Kearney is the new president, Jim Cudaback is vice-president, Alice Howell, secretary, and Mardi Anderson, treasurer. Their terms of office started June 1, and they are elected for one-year terms.

From Past President Jim Cudaback: I enjoyed very much my year as president, and want to say "Thank You" to the officers, committeemen and members for their cooperation during the year. A special thanks to those who assumed responsibility in my absence while serving in the Legislature at Lincoln.

I will continue to work for the Society, and look forward to the many challenges we have ahead of us.

Memorial Gifts have been received from the following members and friends:

Ettamabel Reynolds in memory of Wayne Reynolds
Paul and Mitzi Steinbrink, in memory of Susan Bancroft
Howard Kolbo, in memory of William Lynn
Theresa J. Ross, in memory of John Ross
Ruth L. Schini in memory of Edna Hehner
Helen Paul, in memory of Peter and John Paul
Venetia Peterson, in memory of George Peterson
Sid Murrish, in memory of Bernice Murrish
Nancy Freburg, in memory of Elmer Wiles
Mr. and Mrs. Lee Sanks, in memory of Cecelia Nickel

Margaret Tunks, in memory of Lyman
and Horace Cary and Fred Nye families
Mr. and Mrs. L. L. Rice, in memory of
Mabel Rice
Philip S. Holmgren, in memory of Edna
Hehner and Leonard Silver
Frances and R. L. Link, in memory of
Helen Applegate and Leonard Silver
Marjorie Stover, in memory of
Allen J. Stover

MUSEUM HAPPENINGS

Trails & Rails Museum is off to a good start. 671 school children and teachers visited during April and May. The museum's school program requires many volunteer hours. Jo Bissell was in charge of the project, assisted by Elma Lohrenz, Barbara Larsen, Kathleen Gifford, Norma Schrack, Howard Kolbo, Mike Stauffer, Becky Randall, Laura Koontz and Susan Schmidt. Many good reports have been received on the school program and we thank all who helped. You are appreciated!

The summer program is in full swing. The museum is open from 1-5 p.m. on Sunday, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. on Monday, and 10 a.m. to 8 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday. The 5-8 p.m. opening is a new plan. A \$1.00 donation is requested during these hours. However, Buffalo County Historical Society members are admitted free.

The museum is a part of the 500-mile Quilt Show across Nebraska during June, and there are currently about 25 quilts on display at Trails & Rails. We also have a military exhibit, joining the nation in honoring those who served in the Desert Storm operation.

We have many new flowers on our grounds donated by Jack Erickson and planted by Mike Stauffer. And don't miss Mike's Indian Garden south of the church building.

—Margaret Hohnholt, Summer Museum Director

of five "connected with Grand Mission." In the evening he "preached in the parlor of the hotel to a congregation of thirty." Services were held weekly at the Collins home; after Reverend Gould arrived "we gave him each alternate Sabbath . . . we only knew our Methodist or Presbyterian audience by the minister officiating." The Baptists followed when the Presbyterians started their own church in a downtown building. "Occasionally our Episcopal friends occupied our church," as well as the Congregationalists.

Colonel W. W. Patterson and Maggie Giddings were the first to be married in the Collins home. The first funeral was also held there when Pleasant Rogers, who had been cared for in the home, died. A local carpenter made the casket and Mrs. Collins lined it with her own freshly laundered curtains.

For a time the Wild West came to Kearney when herders drove their stock to the grazing lands on the Fort Kearny Military reservation and proceeded to take over the town in usual cowboy fashion. In September 1875, a group of Texans, who were herding sixty or seventy horses, hit the saloons to celebrate. During the night some of the stock strayed into Milton Collins' cornfield, destroying part of the crop. Milton corraled the horses, intending to hold them for damages. He was returning from filing a complaint when the herders accosted him. In the argument which followed Milton was shot and killed by Jordan P. Smith.

The heartbroken mother, convinced that her son's death was caused by the cowboys' drunkenness, immersed herself in the temperance cause. In 1880 she was elected first president of the W.C.T.U. in the organizational meeting held at her home. Tragedy struck again on May 13, 1882 when her other son, D. Finley, a graduate of Iowa University Law School, was accidentally killed at the age of twenty-five, while hunting near Stephenson Siding (Alfalfa Center). After the death of Asbury Collins on March 9, 1890, Mother Collins gave up her state offices in the Methodist Church, although she remained active in local affairs. She died in 1921.

Bassett wrote of Mrs. Collins:

Their great and sudden afflictions seemed in the case of Mrs. Collins to cause her to be more solicitous for the welfare of her friends. It is not possible to mention . . . the many varied efforts which Mrs. Collins put forth for the interest of Kearney.

In addition to caring for their own families under primitive conditions, early-day women also took in the settlers who were arriving by the hundreds in those first two or three years. Mrs. H. H. Achey, in a letter written for Kearney's fiftieth anniversary, described the chaotic conditions prevailing. When she arrived by train with her ten-month baby at 10:30 P.M., there was no depot, and her husband, a builder, had mistaken the day she was to arrive. ". . . a big crowd of men was there . . . I sure thought I had come to the end of the world." One of the men took Mrs. Achey to the (David) Webberts² who hadn't expected her until the next day. Mrs. Webbert had ten boarders, but had only one room which she could spare for Mrs. Achey. Her husband built a house in a few days, although it had no roof to begin with. "I considered myself more fortunate that some other ladies . . . as some had to sleep on the prairie." In spite of hardships, "We were sure a happy bunch, as they were not classed rich or poor. All were sociable with one another." Mr. Achey built twenty-seven houses from September 6th to December 25th, 1872.

Mrs. Nancy Hull, wife of Dr. John C. Hull, was an early leader and "dominant spirit" of the W.C.T.U. At her urging the members took an active role in aiding the needy. Mrs. Hull, "sometimes with one of her lieutenants", rode her white horse around Kearney and the surrounding area to help the poor.³ She had a special concern for "lonely girls" and took many of them into her own home.

Although the Mother Hull Home was incorporated in April, 1889, there was no record of a building for that use for several years. The women provided meals and clothing from their club rooms until 1893 when they rented the Clifton House at 1809 Central Avenue. The first floor was used for a meeting room and the W.C.T.U. library, while the second floor became a hospital. The name Mother Hull Home was at last adopted when the members bought the former D. B. Clark home at 23rd Street and Avenue B in 1932.

When Mrs. Hull died in March, 1911, the *Kearney Daily Hub* captioned her obituary as follows: "Mrs. Hull was Founder of the W.C.T.U. Hospital, Mother of the Sick, the Poor, and the Homeless and one of the Best Loved and Most Widely Known Women of Buffalo County."

Margaret Anderson, wife of the first elected sheriff, David Anderson, became a prime example of the courage of pioneer women by making a harrowing drive across the prairie to prevent a lynching.⁴ S. D. Richards, who went under several aliases, had ingratiated himself to a widow in Kearney County, hoping to swindle her out of her homestead rights. When she became suspicious he murdered her and killed her three children by grabbing their legs and battering their heads against the bedpost.

Sheriff Anderson and a Pinkerton agent tracked him for three months, finally arresting him in Steubenville, Ohio. Anderson was returning his prisoner in the caboose of a freight train when his wife wired him in Grand Island that a mob was waiting at the Kearney depot with a rope strung over the nearest lamp post. Anderson instructed "Maggie" to meet the train in Buda with her two-horse team and buggy. As soon as the train stopped the sheriff unloaded Richards and, with Maggie's help, chained him to the seat of the buggy. She took off on a wild drive along the railroad tracks. The engineer, infuriated at losing his prisoner, sped alongside her, blowing his whistle, hoping to frighten the horses. Maggie cut away from the tracks toward the jail and managed to deliver Richards to the deputies just before the mob, alerted by the train crew, arrived at the jail. The relieved prisoner was happy to be in the jail. He said, "If I had my choice I would rather take my chances with the mob than take another ride with Maggie Anderson." Richards was saved from lynching, to be tried and hanged legally in Kearney County.

Maud Marston (Burrows) was a woman's rights activist far ahead of her time. She is chiefly remembered as the Woman's Editor of the *Kearney Enterprise* and for her interview of Nelly Bly, but she was the eternal champion of causes, no matter how great or small.⁵ She wrote a lengthy article about the girls who were then housed at the Industrial School, describing their backgrounds and suggesting that women should be concerned as to what could be done for them when they left the school. In other articles she expounded on what she called "women's wrongs."

It was Maud who saw the need for a community hospital and characteristically



**Mrs. Nancy Hull,
W.C.T.U. leader and founder
of W.C.T.U. Hospital**

tackled the problem by calling a meeting of twenty-four women. She launched a barrage of publicity which brought widespread interest. At a public meeting on February 16, 1890 she was named president of a hospital committee by acclamation. With the collapse of the Kearney Boom the hospital faded into oblivion.

A hospital was created in 1902 and kept open until 1910. When it was turned over to George A. Beecher, Bishop of the Western Diocese of the Episcopal Church, it was renamed St. Luke's Hospital. Maud again threw herself into raising funds for the hospital. After the Catholic Church announced plans to build a hospital building she carried her campaign for a new community hospital through the pages of the *Hub*. By 1923, when construction of Good Samaritan Hospital began, St. Luke's closed its doors.

Maud also practiced law, was director of music for the Kearney Schools, a well-known public speaker, and once ran unsuccessfully for the State Legislature.

Drs. George and Eliza Mills, who came to Kearney in 1885, had their home and office in the stucco building at 16 West 23rd Street. Mary Spencer Elliott remembered Eliza as "a huge woman, extremely homely and very gruff."⁶ She rode about town on a bicycle, and the sight of the 250-pound woman peddling around town with "bloomers billowing" was enough to strike terror in the hearts of many children. In spite of her "top sergeant" manner, she was kind in her own way, "going into badly kept shacks, cleaning them and often supplying the soap and clean clothing." The Millises left Kearney in 1912, selling their home and office to another husband and wife team, Dr. and Mrs. Judd Albertus Strong.

When early-day women were left to raise their children alone, either by death or desertion, they were lucky if they inherited a business which they could carry on. Lottie Norton, whose husband Charles Oliver died in 1896, was so successful that at one time she was the richest woman in Nebraska, dealing in farm and ranch lands. She was the first woman to be a member of a commercial club and was prominent in many philanthropic and patriotic organizations. She organized the Kearney chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution and later served as State Regent. Mrs. Norton gave the city the property for the Carnegie Library.

As in most communities, women carried the torch for education and culture. Mary Frances (Fanny) Nevius was the first school teacher. Adah Basten Seaman was the first of a long line of woman librarians. Amanda Swenson, a graduate of the Royal Conservatory of Music in Copenhagen, gave generously of her talent as a soloist and a director of community choruses.

Mr. and Mrs. Frances G. Hamer came to Kearney in 1872. Their first home was on a farm north of the present high school. Francis set up his law office in a corner of Dart's store and his wife Rebecca was left alone for days, "even weeks". She had grown up in a large family and was very lonely, sometimes hiding in the cornfield because



Mary Frances Nevius
First teacher in Kearney
1872



Mrs. Rebecca A. Hamer
First president of
Nineteenth Century Club

of the Indians. Francis later built a home at 321 West 27th Street. Rebecca was the first president of the Nineteenth Century Club, later the Kearney Woman's Club.

Mrs. Ella Bessie and her husband Charles came to Kearney in 1878. Her accounts of early day Kearney, many of them given as programs for the Woman's Club, have been invaluable to local historians.

Not to be forgotten are the countless women who kept open the doors of their respective churches with their church dinners, bazaars and other good works.

NOTES

1. Kearney Come Back Letters
2. Parents of printer H. A. Webbort
3. *Tales of Buffalo County*, Vol. I, pp. 108, 127
4. *Where the Buffalo Roamed*, pp. 87-94
5. *Tales of Buffalo County*, Vol. I, pp. 58-60
6. *Hub*, Centennial Issue; Jackie Rosenlof, "Kearney Medicine," p. 20
7. *Tales of Buffalo County*, Vol. II, pp. 100-104

OTHER SOURCES

Bassett, *History of Buffalo County; Biographical Souvenir of Buffalo, Kearney and Phelps Counties*; Maud Marston Burrows Scrapbook; Bonnie Bernholtz, *How It All Began*

BUFFALO TALES is the official publication of the Buffalo County Historical Society, a non-profit organization, whose address is P. O. Box 523, Kearney, NE 68848. It is sent to all members of the Society. Membership is open to anyone who has an interest in the history of Buffalo County and its people. Annual dues, payable January 1, are:

Basic Membership	\$10.00
Institutional Membership	\$15.00
Supporting Membership	\$25.00
Life memberships are \$100.00 for an individual; \$150.00 for husband and wife, jointly.	

Directors

Term expiring June 1, 1992: Glen Wisch, Philip Holmgren, Mike Stauffer, all of Kearney;
 Chad Anderson of Amherst.
 Term expiring June 1, 1993: Alice Howell, Elmer Holzrichter, Susan C. Lynch, all of Kearney;
 Viola Livingston of Gibbon.
 Term expiring June 1, 1994: Howard Kolbo, Mardi Anderson, Lois Rahmann, all of Kearney;
 Jim Cudaback of Riverdale.

Officers (1 year term)

President Susan C. Lynch
 Vice President Jim Cudaback
 Secretary Alice Howell
 Treasurer Mardi Anderson

Trails & Rails Museum

706 West 11th Street

(308) 234-3041

Buffalo County Historical Society
 Box 523
 Kearney, NE 68848-0523
 Address Correction Requested

Non-Profit Organization
 Bulk Rate
 U.S. Postage
 PAID
 Postal Permit No. 7
 Kearney, Nebraska

B
 LEO F JACOBSON
 3619 AVE F
 KEARNEY NE 68847